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Sector switching and life-career fulfillment

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**How sector switching can offer more fulfilling life career choices**

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Although attention has been paid to public or private sector occupational choice, understanding mid-career sector switching is a developing area of research and may be ‘one of the missing ingredients in theories of job mobility and recruitment’ (Su & Bozeman, 2009). This field is particularly pertinent to United Kingdom (UK) public sector organisations, which continue to face downsizing and pressure on pay and pensions, while the private sector in the UK raises its employment offer, as world economies recover from recession. This article shares the findings of research, which explored whether there are aspects of public sector employment which the private sector cannot easily match. It considers how this might inform public sector recruitment and retention policies, and enable more fulfilling life career choices for employees. The research focussed on information technology (IT) specialists who have highly sought after skills, and can therefore easily switch from the public to the private sector and earn much more (Coombs, 2009). Why then do some stay and others leave?

Our review of the literature found that public service motivation (PSM), the desire to work in the public interest and contribute to social good, is an evolving if contested construct, presented both as ‘a crucial variable in managing public sector organisations’, and ‘a far-fetched idealistic concept with little relationship to the harsh reality of public management practice’ (Vandenabeele, Beyer, & Ritz, 2014, p.781). A focus on survey studies, since PSM emerged in the literature in the 1990s, has limited development of this construct as ‘there is a limit to what one can learn about careers from questionnaire-based studies’ (Bozeman & Ponomarev, 2009). A qualitative approach allowed us to explore the ways PSM and related concepts are mobilised in sector switching decisions in the context of shifting demands across the life span (Super, Savickas & Super, 1996).

### Method

The research was based in a medium sized public sector organisation. Twenty IT specialists participated in the study, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Senior managers in the research organisation identified as potential participants current employees whose departure would have a high impact on IT business delivery. These senior managers and Human Resources also identified former employees who had switched to the private sector who were assessed to have hard to recruit skills and who senior managers would have liked to retain. Human Resources sent invitations to participate to these former employees on the researcher’s behalf. As the interviews progressed, snowball sampling took place as participants nominated current and former colleagues who had not been identified by purposive sampling. The sampling strategy recruited twelve participants

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who were currently employed at the research organisation and eight former employees who had left to join the private sector. This provided a range of perspectives about the complex reasoning involved in decision making about sector switching over mid to late life career span.

Narrative interviews explored the ways these IT specialists constructed their public sector career narratives. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, were audio recorded, and transcribed with permission. Narrative summaries were generated for each participant and common themes for staying and leaving identified. Themes were collated in matrices to identify patterns and mapped over time to include broader contextual issues and allow the identification of narrative forms.

### Summary of findings

Thematic analysis identified two main drivers for leaving the public sector: career stagnation and higher salary. The main reasons for remaining were the entwined themes of the importance and interest of the work, i.e. how participants defined PSM; social support; work-life balance; job security and opportunities for growth. While this reinforces the importance of work and career development in retention, beyond this there were qualitatively different reasons for staying and leaving, suggesting asymmetry between reasons to stay and to leave. Our research suggests that PSM, public *service* motivation, is part of a broader construct public *sector* motivation, of which social support; work-life balance and job security are also important elements. The contextual and temporal perspective offered by our research found that whereas PSM was a stable, core value for individuals, the salience of social support; work-life balance and job security to sector switching decisions transitioned over their life career span. Moreover, whereas quantitative work identifies individual factors relevant to decision making about sector switching, our qualitative approach recognises that career decisions about workplace change are influenced by multiple, contextually interconnected elements across life span and space (Klag, Jansen, & Lee, 2015). Synthesis of thematic analysis with contextual and temporal data provided by the narrative summaries, restored the richness of sequencing in accounts, lost in thematic analysis. Five key narrative forms were identified: *Hardcoded*; *Time for a Parting*; *When Money Matters*. *Swiping Out* and *Turbulent Talent*.

1. *Hardcoded* described strongly progressive narratives of professional and long-term career fulfilment.

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*I don't think I could be on the outside of this now...it really matters to me watching the news and feeling that has some direct relevance to me. (Lucy)*

2. *Time for a Parting* illustrated coming to terms with the disillusionment and disengagement that can occur when strengths, which sustained achievement, no longer align with organisational culture.

*I am of that opinion now that maybe I've sailed my...y'know...or made my journey...the road is coming, but no-one's willing to have that proper conversation about that...what does that make you feel...maybe it is time for a parting...maybe it is that time...(Michael)*

3. *When Money Matters* presented strong progressive narratives transitioning to a regressive phase as mid-career practical pressures compete with strength of commitment to Organisation X.

*It felt like my 20s was all about the job and going out and enjoying myself...now the job is the means to having the house and family life I would like. (Charles)*

4. Career stagnation was the dominant theme in *Swiping Out* leading to a decisive move to the private sector.

*It wouldn't be an easy decision because it's not just an employer...but it's a decision I am ready to take...I'm done. (Jonathan)*

5. *Turbulent Talent* described cyclical narratives of career commitment and disappointment alternatively colliding and reconciling with organisational culture. After joining from the private sector, an entrepreneur described his commitment to Organisation X as:

*...really strong and I would say stronger than people who have worked there a long time because I chose to move to half salary to go and work there...not that you get any credit for that, right...(Lawrence)*

## Discussion and recommendations

Participants spoke with pride and passion about taking part in interesting and innovative work of national importance. PSM was hardcoded in their personal value systems and stable across their careers. It provided a compelling reason to stay in public sector employment, made decisions to leave difficult, and endured after switching to the private sector. Narrative analysis provided an understanding of the emotional power of PSM underlying participants' lived experience of decision making about sector switching. The five narrative forms that emerged show the interplay between PSM and the changing aspects of public sector motivation: social support; work-life balance and job security. Quantitative research has suggested that individuals who demonstrate a strong motivation toward public service, tend to form more supportive professional relationships (Carpenter, Doverspike, & Migeul, 2011; Hamidullah, Van Ryzin, & Li, 2016). The narratives in this study build on this by offering insight into the lived experience of such social support. Participants spoke movingly about support from colleagues at difficult times such as bereavement, a road accident and the serious illness of a child. Quantitative work has identified work-life balance as a motivator for working in the public sector, (Buelens & Van den Broeck, 2007; Hansen, 2014). However, participants in this study varied in believing that they were or had been able to achieve this in the public sector, and if so, whether it had influenced decisions to stay or to leave. Quantitative research has identified job security as a reason why people choose to work in the public sector, (Lewis & Frank, 2002; Hansen, 2014). Our research found that those with up to date skills had a robust sense of their employability and tended to be younger participants. Job security mattered more to participants who had moved into management positions, had less current technical skills and were less confident about their employability. Leaving for a higher salary was also linked to shifting life and family demands.

Our research findings contribute to qualitative work which emphasises the importance of a contextual approach to understanding the 'broader landscape in which professionals live and negotiate careers' (Lee, Kossek, Hall, & Litrico, 2011, p.1548). While high levels of PSM and public sector motivation make decisions to leave difficult, this will not sufficiently mitigate the impact of career stagnation or allay the practical economic pressures that can lead to sector switching. This research suggests that public sector organisations seeking to retain the skills of IT professionals in a competitive job market, need to recognise that 'individuals lead complex lives that consist of entangled strands of work, family, personal, and community life' (Lee, Kossek, Hall & Litrico, 2011, p.1548).

As PSM and the other public sector motivators may not be enough to retain IT professionals, ongoing dialogue (Klag, Jansen, & Lee, 2015) may help to mitigate attrition rates arising from career stagnation. However, this will not be enough to prevent mid-career practical pressures eroding commitment to remaining in the public sector. Rather than try to compete on pay, public sector organisations should consider flexible career models, anticipating IT professionals' sector switching, and encouraging them to return at a later stage of their life career span. Supporting flexible careers for these employees could allow more fulfilling life choices, and help public institutions maintain IT capabilities critical to their performance, with the associated benefits for society more widely.

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